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Exploring migrant workers motivations for migration and their perceived contributions to the UK

A case study of Liverpool Executive Summary

Lisa Scullion

Salford Housing & Urban Studies Unit
University of Salford

And

Simon Pemberton

Merseyside Social Inclusion Observatory (MSIO)
Department of Civic Design
University of Liverpool

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Background to the study

In recent years, there has been an increasing focus on the migration of people to the UK, particularly from Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries¹. Political and media debate has focused on the number of people who have arrived in the UK, the impact this has had on indigenous workers, as well as the impact on public services. There has also been an interest in the contribution of migrant workers, particularly in terms of the economic contribution they make.

A number of studies have been carried out across the UK which look at the experiences and needs of migrant workers². Many of these studies have focused on issues such as employment, accommodation, skills and qualifications and community cohesion. The majority of these studies have primarily adopted a survey approach and, although providing very useful information on a range of issues, there is a lack of more in-depth information relating to people's experiences.

The research was commissioned by Migrant Workers North West in May 2009 and conducted by researchers from the Salford Housing & Urban Studies Unit (SHUSU) at the University of Salford and Merseyside Social Inclusion Observatory (MSIO) at the University of Liverpool. The purpose was to provide a more in-depth understanding of what motivates people to come to the UK, what affects people's decisions to stay or leave, and what migrants perceive their contribution to be to the UK.

Aims of the research

This research had two main aims:

1. Understanding the motivations of migrant workers moving to and from the UK

In particular, a focus was placed on:

- Those whose intentions have changed over time as they have gained greater rights and responsibilities;
- The extent to which individuals have brought families/dependants to the UK and how this has affected their motivations;
- Any skills or employment issues (particularly in relation to skills match/mis-match) and how this has affected their motivations;

¹ The Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia (commonly referred to as the A8 countries); Bulgaria and Romania (commonly referred to as the A2 countries).

² Pemberton, S. and Stevens, C. (2006) *Supporting Migrant Workers in the North West of England*, Liverpool: Merseyside Social Inclusion Observatory; Hunt, L. and Steele, A. (2008) *Migrant workers in Rochdale and Oldham*, Salford: University of Salford; Scullion, L. and Morris, G. (2009) *Migrant workers in Liverpool: A study of A8 and A2 nationals*, Salford: University of Salford; Scullion, L., Morris, G. and Steele, A. (2009) *A study of A8 and A2 nationals in Nottingham*, Salford: University of Salford; Scullion, L. and Morris, G. (2009) *A study of migrant workers in Peterborough*, Salford: University of Salford.

- The affect of people's overall experiences (accommodation, relationships, public services, benefit eligibility) on their motivations;
- The extent to which the relaxation of labour market restrictions in other EU countries impacts upon their intentions; and
- The relative position of 'origin' economies compared to the UK economy and the impact this may have upon motivations.

2. Exploring what migrant workers perceive they contribute to the UK and how they feel they will contribute in the future

In particular, an emphasis was placed on:

- Financial contributions, including patterns of saving/expenditure;
- Labour market contributions, including how they are helping to fill vacancies and meet the needs of employers, their impact on the productivity of employers, and any changes in their level or type of contribution over time; and
- Contribution to 'community life', including the activities that they are involved in and future intentions to contribute.

Methods

The key purpose of the research was to generate a more in-depth exploration of migrant motivations and contributions, the research methodology therefore involved semi-structured interviews with migrant workers. A total of twenty in-depth interviews were undertaken between June and September 2009. The focus of this research was Central and Eastern European migrants, who currently feature most in public and political debate. In particular, Czech, Polish, Slovak and Lithuanian migrant workers were targeted for both pragmatic reasons (resource/time constraints and language skills/community links of the interviewer), but also due to such communities being relatively prominent within the case study area (Liverpool).

The research employed a community researcher with Czech, Polish and Slovak language skills. This method enabled the study to include a range of individuals who would otherwise have been difficult to access.

Photographic project

In addition to carrying out interviews with migrant workers, the research also worked in collaboration with a photographic project. This photographic project was carried out by Matthew Davenport, a professional photographer, as part of his Masters in Documentary Photography at the University of Bolton.

The photographic element of the research involved a choice of one of the following, depending on what the respondents were most comfortable with:

- a portrait photo of them or other family members
- a photo of items around their home that have meaning to them

A number of the images produced in the project feature in a separate booklet entitled *Migration Works: Exploding the myths about migration and exploring the motivations which bring migrant workers to the UK* (available from Migrant Workers North West).

Background information about the respondents

- A mix of Czech, Polish, Slovak and Lithuanian individuals formed the basis of the sample.
- A mix of young (16-29), middle age (30-44) and more mature individuals (45+) participated in the research.
- There was a balance between those who identified themselves as single (and living with friends or on their own) and those who had families.
- The majority were currently employed in jobs which mirrored national patterns (such as warehouse operatives, food processing, packing, cleaning and production-line work). A small number were employed in more skilled occupations (such as teaching). Three people indicated that they were currently unemployed.
- The interviewees held primarily intermediate level qualifications in the form of diplomas (or equivalent). Qualifications appeared to have little influence on their current type of employment in the UK.

Findings

Motivations

- A combination of economic and non-economic factors - both in country of origin and in the UK are important in explaining the motivations of migrants to come to the UK for work. But, while the reasons for CEE migrants coming to the UK are (by and large) primarily economic, the relative importance of economic 'pull' factors – in the form of the availability of employment and a favourable exchange rate - may have lessened slightly in the current economic climate.
- The significance of 'push' factors in their home country (high rates of unemployment and a perceived lack of opportunities, along with continuing discrimination for Czech Roma individuals) has meant that those that have remained in employment in the UK appear more reluctant to return, with such factors reinforcing their original motivations to migrate (i.e. '*work and pay = stay*').
- Older, as well as younger migrants have come to the UK for 'new experiences' and to improve their linguistic capabilities, with the consequence that the older migrants appear to be particularly committed to remaining within the UK in the medium-longer term, especially if they are contributing towards a UK state pension.
- Influences impacting upon migrants' motivations to move, stay or leave the UK do not tend to change, despite many becoming eligible for UK state benefits. Indeed, most migrants who had tried to claim benefit had experienced difficulties in securing such support.
- Ultimately, the availability of certain types of (private rented) accommodation (and informed by size and cost, and where possible, quality) overrides the influence of a desire to live in a 'good neighbourhood' for most migrants until their economic position has improved.
- The availability and type of employment (locally) to migrants is the key issue on whether they stay a) within their local neighbourhood; b) within Liverpool itself (Manchester was seen as alternative destination in respect of job opportunities); and c) within the UK.
- Intra-migrant tensions have increased in the current economic downturn as a consequence of more competition for fewer jobs and has led some migrants to either move elsewhere in the city (for employment and to avoid conflict) or in some cases to even move back home.
- Whilst the presence of family/friends/other migrants may initially facilitate access to advice/support, over time many have become less dependent on such networks.

- Although having aspirations to work in better paid and more skilled employment, the majority accepted that they would remain in the same types of jobs that they were currently undertaking due to a) their existing skills/aptitudes; b) their limited command of English; and c) the current economic climate and the effect this has on their ability to change jobs.
- Most respondents – regardless of having knowledge of economic conditions in their home country and/or information on the relaxation of the labour market restrictions in other EU countries - indicated that these were not acting as an influence on their motivation to return.
- Job availability, a positive local (built) environment (for example, good quality housing) and linguistic issues were noted as being important in shaping migrants' decisions to stay or go, especially for those more skilled.

Contributions

- Migrants are spending the majority of their income in the UK - ranging from all of their wages to 50% of their wages, with very few sending money back to their home country.
- A number of respondents did try to save some money, however, in order to have a 'safety net'.
- Debt is also an issue - a number of respondents made reference to having debts in the UK that they needed to pay off.
- The length of time that migrants had been in the UK appears to influence levels of spending/saving, with new arrivals more likely to save but after living for some time in the UK individuals started to spend their savings due to changing circumstances (e.g. accommodation) or through wanting to buy additional things.
- Most migrants tended to spend most of their income on rent, food, utilities, transport and sports/leisure facilities.
- In terms of the labour market, many migrants perceived themselves as harder-working than their English counterparts, but that they may have contributed to their own pressures to work harder through newer arrivals being willing to work as fast as possible (to secure and retain employment).
- Intra-migrant tensions were noted as existing within the workplace, especially in instances where supervisory/managerial positions were held by other migrant workers.
- Respondents were contributing to a range of community activities such as church-related events and migrant worker support groups.

- Respondents expressed a desire to mix with a range of other non-migrants in 'community' activity(ies) but that this was often curtailed through the nature of their (shift) work and their linguistic capability.
- Having British friends was often perceived by migrants as being more beneficial, providing opportunities for them to learn about the local culture, as well as helping with their English language skills.

Overall recommendations

Improving economic intelligence and data capture

- A more detailed analysis – including the use of economic forecasting – is required of labour market conditions in migrants' countries of origin, including both the quantity and quality of employment available and wage levels relative to costs of living. This will make it easier for organisations such as the North West Regional Development Agency (NWDA) and Migrant Workers North West (MWNW) to predict the likely flows of migrants into and out of areas such as the North West.
- Further research is needed on how, where and when CEE migrants spend their income, as well as the effects of the recent economic downturn in the UK on their expenditure/savings ratio.
- The fact that most CEE migrants indicated that the rental costs of accommodation was their biggest outlay needs to be considered in terms of the benefits accruing to private landlords and how this contribution can be capitalised upon in order to improve the quality of housing conditions in this sector of the housing market, particularly houses of multiple occupation (HMOs) within disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Ensuring the availability of a suitable pool of productive labour for local and regional employers

- As conditions improve in the UK or elsewhere and/or CEE migrants become more proficient in their command of the English language, their propensity to search for alternative work with better conditions or work that is more relevant to their existing skills/qualifications may increase. Consideration needs to be given to any effects this may have in terms of the recruitment of labour to work in lower skilled occupational sectors and the competitiveness and viability of local/regional employers currently dependant on CEE migrants.
- Organisations such as Migrant Workers North West (MWNW) must continue to promote the active take up of its *Employment Charter* (for migrant workers) and lobby other agencies (such as the NWDA) and the Gangmaster's Licensing Authority (GLA) to ensure that both existing and any new CEE migrants are not exploited (regardless of sector).
- For more highly skilled CEE migrants, the nature of working conditions and opportunities for career enhancement in the UK relative to their home country was viewed as a key factor impacting upon their decision to stay or leave, rather than wage/income levels *per se*. Sector-specific strategies could therefore be developed which seek to accommodate the aspirations/priorities of CEE migrants alongside the local workforce in order to capitalise upon/retain such labour.

- Given that some mature CEE migrants indicated a desire to remain in the UK and in employment (for at least five years) so that they could access a state pension, local and regional employers could be further encouraged to recruit and retain such individuals as a reliable (and stable) source of labour. Furthermore, they offer the opportunity to highlight the different ways in which members of the older indigenous population can contribute to the labour market.

More effective targeting of CEE migrants and housing/community cohesion implications

- The research has identified in a reasonable level of detail with regards to the specific neighbourhoods that CEE migrants initially move to in Liverpool, with concentrations of particular communities (i.e. Czech and Slovak) in specific areas. There is the opportunity for those attempting to engage with migrant communities to target a range of neighbourhoods through a variety of techniques – both area based and perhaps more thematically (for example, housing). Consideration is required, however, with regards to the effect of such targeting on issues of community cohesion (i.e. perception by indigenous population of resources going to migrants).
- In order to ensure the delivery of services (such as education, health care, etc) can be planned and resourced appropriately there is a need to improve the evidence base, with regular monitoring of the local population.
- Given the apparent initial primacy of 'suitable' accommodation (in terms of cost, size and quality) over and above neighbourhood preferences, local authorities, RSLs and indeed the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) need to try and ensure a range of tenure opportunities (owner-occupation; private rented; social rented) are available to CEE migrants who wish to remain in Liverpool and who can make a substantial contribution to the local/regional economy, as well as different sectors of the housing market.

Improving the quality of the built environment

- Although economic imperatives and the availability of employment are influential in terms of migrant motivations, it was noted that the quality of the built environment was also important. Consequently, there needs to be consideration of how regeneration, neighbourhood and housing renewal programmes can help to improve local conditions, and in turn facilitate a) positive perceptions of a more safe/quality local environment in which to live; and b) provide suitable accommodation (size, cost and quality) in both the public and private sector that is conducive to the needs of all CEE migrants (skilled and unskilled), as well as the local population.

Addressing intra-migrant tensions

- There was some evidence that certain CEE migrants were (in the current economic climate) finding it more difficult to access work due to discriminatory or financial barriers being applied by other CEE nationals and/or CEE-run support agencies. Such issues require monitoring – and regulating - where appropriate. The provision of further information and/or advice (through a variety of mechanisms and in a number of places) is also advocated.
- From a housing perspective, there is also evidence of tensions emerging between migrants. Local authorities and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) therefore need to be aware of a potential increase in demand for (larger and relatively inexpensive) rental properties as CEE migrants a) become eligible for such properties once they have been in continuous employment for over 12 months; and b) as a consequence of being discriminated against by other CEE migrants/migrant landlords.

Recognising and responding to pressures on public services

- The demand on education, health and welfare services by migrant workers in the medium-term needs to be recognised by local Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) and Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and resources for language support/translation and broader education/health service provision allocated accordingly. This is also something that the Migration Impacts Fund (MIF) could be focused towards.

Enhancing economic and community contributions

- The research indicated a number of different ways in which CEE migrants contribute to the local economy and to community life - both individually and collectively - such as support to church-based activities and through establishing or becoming involved in community support groups. What emerged, nevertheless, was the opportunity to develop a wider range of activities – many of which could actively be promoted in workplace settings – to bring different groups together in order to reduce intra-migrant and intra-community tensions, as well as utilising the knowledge of migrants to support the wider community (e.g. CAB-type work).
- In addition, a concerted effort could be made through local Neighbourhood Agreements (NAs) to promote participation by CEE migrants in more formalised (democratic) decision-making processes.
- With reference to local economic contributions, it is suggested that the New Economics Foundation's *Local Multiplier 3 (LM3) approach*³ (or a suitable equivalent) is used to assess the local multiplier that emerges from a) public sector support to CEE migrants; and b) CEE migrants' disposable income spent within the neighbourhood. Consideration also needs to be given to what may help increase local multiplier effects (such as procurement and commissioning activities by the public sector and the encouragement of short-term CEE migrants to spend more of their disposable income).

³ See <http://www.lm3online.org/> for further details.